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THE ÆSTHETIC IDEAL

BY FR. ROUSSEL-DESPIERRES

Translated from the French

CONCLUSION

EVERY free mind makes a philosophy for itself and in the last analysis that philosophy harks back to the moral and practical life, that is to say, to the realization of the Ideal.

Our ideal is Beauty; our method Liberty. Beauty being the supreme end of desire and liberty forming its law, the system of which I have sketched a brief outline in these pages will constitute—if this title were not too ambitious a one for so modest an essay—a philosophy of desire.

Practical life finds in the cult of beauty the most complete employment of the faculties of man. It is the source of the most profound as well as purest of pleasures, since these renew themselves without cessation; and likewise do the joy, the serenity and beauty of life grow greater, for every æsthetic pleasure makes our cultivation deeper and more perfect, sharpens our sense of the beautiful and, while affirming the same, increases enjoyment tenfold.

On the other hand æsthetic morality, so I believe, realizes perfection in the moral life.⁵¹

Pascal established above matter and thought the realm of charity. We recognize—and this is hardly separating oneself far from Pascal—that the desire for good is infinitely above intelligence and, as he said, “of a different order from that same.”

Beauty is the sympathetic and desirable form of good and for me it is the principle of moral activity. Every moral act is beautiful and there is nothing that is beautiful which does not possess a moral value, because every beauty is educational. The domain of the moral “will” is infinite and the task of the educator consists in exalting the desire and love of good to the height of enthusiastic passion. The attraction of the beautiful and the pleasure of liberty form the springs of education.⁵²

When the educator has made the soul of a young man truly beautiful, then the moral life has become no more than a habit in the æsthetic life.

A habit which will render useless every code and every moral restraint, as soon as good will and desire for good (which imply the love of the beautiful)

are no longer combated by the hereditary instincts of violence, hostility, cupidity and egoism. Until then, below the free domain of the moral will (which is that of the virtues) æsthetic morality maintains those duties that guarantee the social interests, the highest formula of which is the obligation to respect in another's person that person's ideal. But it rejects as immoral every idea of sanction.⁵³

The æsthetic ideal in which the good and the beautiful merge themselves in final perfection and which govern at once practical conduct, social relations, leisures of life, even art and even thought, is a universal idea; for the reason that the desire for beauty is a universal sentiment and among all the sentiments of the soul is the only one whose fecundity is inexhaustible.

That universality will be denied. People will say that the æsthetic life is a privileged existence, an aristocratical one, not practical in democracies. Certainly, if one understands as democracy the disappearance of all intellectual authority, then the æsthetic ideal would be perfectly chimerical; for the cult of art and morality can not do without artists and thinkers. It presupposes a continuous ascent of humanity toward its dream, and that rise is not possible except when some men, superior to the others, causing the Ideal to retire toward the infinite, extend the flight of their thoughts farther and farther upward, and unfold even more widely its field to human hope. But nowadays, who ever conceives of such a democracy?⁵⁴

The æsthetic ideal is compatible even with a socialistic régime. However, contemporary socialism may be weakened by too material ambitions. If some day a collectivist society should be organized, it is not possible that humanity should remain very long contented with the satisfaction of its stomach. The Ideal is a law of the mind; the humblest brain has its own. Even beneath the ruling of intellectual oppression Beauty will become fatally the universal form of the Ideal. Liberty, which is so much needed, will not be lacking to the æsthetic ideal. Man never resigns himself to servitude, and already certain socialist writers like M. Fournière strive to retain individualism and liberty in their plans of social organization.⁵⁵

Note 51.—Four moralities:

Natural morality (preservation of the individual and the species, expansion of life).

Religious morality (renunciation of life on earth against a future life with regard to annihilation, etc., antithesis of the natural moral morality).

Social or traditional morality (compromise between the religious and natural moralities, thanks to which life remains desolate but preserves itself).

Æsthetic morality (a morality truly human which borrows the preservative laws of life from natural morality—because life is the means to the ideal—and one that establishes our end in beauty, the flower of life, the smile of the good).

Note 52.—The principle of liberty in the moral life is before all things a principle of method. Here the background merges itself in the form—the act into the will—matter into the work of art. In fact it is not through the precepts which it proposes to us that æsthetic philosophy asserts its power; if it rises superior to so many other doctrines, that is because it forms a moral régime, a régime of enthusiasm for the good and the beautiful.

Note 53.—Obedience to these duties, to sum up, is a question of social loyalty. But loyalty is an æsthetic habit of the conscience. Thus morality, in its negative and imperative part, as well as in its positive and voluntary part, brings itself back again entirely to beauty.

Note 54.—Undoubtedly after—or even before—the duty of justice, society had for its first charge assistance. But when society has attended to these two requirements, what is there that would justify social existence? That goal alone which consists in creating lofty thinkers and great artists who may render life more beautiful and delightful!

Note 55.—M. de Vogué affirms somewhere that toward the end of his life Benoît Malon deplored seeing socialism shut in and retarded by entirely material preoccupations, and recognized the need of a lofty social ideal.

The most dangerous adversaries of the æsthetic ideal are in other quarters. Religion will be the most irreconcilable. Far from me any thought of Polemics! I can only regard Religion as a grand social fact, or, more exactly speaking, as a very powerful *régime*.⁵⁶

Like all the forms and beings which appear on this earth Religion has its destiny; that is the lot of everything—to be born in order to die! And in all the lands the sun illuminates Religion begins to perish. But very light-minded and very culpable were those polemical writers and philosophers who strove madly to demonstrate the inanity, the imbecility of religious dogmas, before they had found a certainty and an Ideal to take their place! Comte delighted in repeating this formula whose author I do not know: *We should destroy that only which we can replace*. In truth it is just and profound. But there are things that seem to destroy themselves, so complex are the causes for their dissolution. When that becomes clear, we ought to hasten to accelerate it. If my house falls to ruin, I shall rebuild it as quickly as I can. If temples crumble, to-morrow humanity will have need of a roof under which to shelter its hopes. When the Ideal turns to dust, it is necessary to hasten and restore the Ideal.

Will science be the heir of Religion? Here is a century and a half during which a number of thinkers have been affirming it. Scientific conceptions have rejuvenated the human mind; the Industrial applications of Science have renewed the face of the earth. There is a far shorter interval between a Roman of the time of Cato and a contemporary of Louis Fourteenth than between the latter and our time—if we measure historical periods by the transformations of life and thought, not by the accumulation of centuries all alike.

Science may believe that she closes this first age of humanity which Religion and Art have entertained, and that now at last has come the serious and grave period of research, certainty and pondered forethought. Nothing grander than the truth, if in fact it is possible! and nothing more intoxicating than the hope of truth! Lady Science also is beautiful, with a severe and singularly strong beauty. She is moral, she is educational, since she makes supple and fortifies intelligence, raises it above the mean trifles of the social life and frees it from the vulgar ambitions and pleasures—and because in this way she is a sovereign peacemaker.

Can, then, the scientific ideal fill the void which the religious ideal has left while disappearing from

earth? No. The need of an ideal is "of a different order" from the need of truth; in the human mind it occupies an infinitely loftier and wider place. The truth, or rather the logic of things, is only one of the elements of which a conception of the Ideal is composed. It does not fill its place; it does not quench our thirst for the infinite. If man is eager to know the secret of things, it is not that secret which interests him the most; it is his dream of happiness; and as to the hope of happiness, Science is not the thing that supports it.⁵⁷

Has Science any social value?

However perfect one may imagine it, the scientific organization of society can not satisfy man for long. The rigor of the universal laws whereon science has to support itself will not exercise any moderating power upon the conflict of human passions and human ambitions. Feeling can only be opposed to feeling and Science is alien to it. Human sensitiveness is infinite; but, provided we are allowed to desire and love, we readily allow ourselves to be fooled as to the objects of our feelings. The intelligence struggles against passion with painfulness and does not triumph over it; that victory is reserved for a new passion. The conditions of the social harmony, up to whatever scientific evidence they may reach, will not find a sure guarantee in that evidence. But propose that harmony to æsthetic sentiment which contains so much love, and then, the hostile passions kept in with difficulty hitherto, and finally attached to another object, will be reconciled in order to reach it by outbursts of an unknown force. No human work has cohesion and lasting quality except on condition of being as it were cemented by feeling. And it is because the entirely intellectual principle of science implies the indifference and inertness of sentiment that we can base the hopes of any definitive social progress upon the acquisitions and development of the scientific mind: sovereignty therein is refused it.

Thinkers who are going to build social systems ought to search for support much more in sympathetic feelings and in the very freedom of the imagination than in economical or scientific concepts which will satisfy the intelligence without acting upon will.

Another cause renders the scientific ideal an illusion. We have no right to count on ever having the pleasures of knowledge accessible to every man. Study presupposes a life free from every other care. At the present time we are suffering from an excess of physical and cerebral labor, and if it be possible to hope that this exacting quantity of work will be diminished in a society scientifically organized, it remains sure that the needs of common subsistence will never allow of time and strength enough among the great mass of men for laborious leisure. Man has need of joy, of a smile, of repose; whereas the rule of Science is a slavery to an inflexible law, a severe hard life deprived of the Ideal, since there can be no ideal without liberty.

The æsthetic ideal, drawing its strength from freedom of desire and enjoyment of that liberty,

Note 57.—It is the very precision of science, it is the very certainty of its conclusions which produce the obstacle in the way of its psychological influence. Human imagination requires an immense Unknown in order to sow therein its hopes and build therein its dream. Science enchains it too harshly to Reality.

Note 56.—Christianism is the enemy of the human race, whose purest sentiments it combats and condemns—taste for living, love, cult of the beautiful. . . . It was not Luther, nor was it Calvin, who tore the mask from Catholicism; it is not science that overthrows in Protestantism what remains of the Christian dogma. It was the æsthetic feeling of humanity which took its revenge in the sixteenth century; it is the pagan rebellion of the senses and freed intelligence, sustained during four centuries of combat, that triumphs to-day over the religion of Christ.

Polemic dies out for lack of aliment. But though christianism is dying, respect for religious consciences ought to remain our first rule, and if in the material order we granted to all men an absolute liberty of practising what they believe, so in the moral order also we should bow before the paling phantom of the religious ideal, and wait until it shall vanish in the light of reason, before the splendor of a purer ideal.

possesses thus an incomparable superiority over Science.

But the greatest blame, doubtless, that weighs upon Science is its impotence in establishing a morality. Especially in this matter it would be necessary that it should base itself on a perfect certainty; but that certainty, which might establish a scientific morality, could be nothing else than the knowledge itself of the primary and final causes, or, at least, a clear-cut intelligence of the destinies of the world and of mankind. This certainty escapes from actual science, and the science of the future will not reach it, either. Here we must repeat once more: this belongs to a different order of things.

The scientific ideal is nothing but a very humble ideal of practical life. Scientific morality, deprived of that principle of energy and action which is feeling, is condemned to remain at once very vulgar and very sterile. It can only be a morality of interests. How far superior is æsthetic morality, which, merging together the good and the beautiful, adds to good actions the attraction of pleasure, and thus seeks in desire the most active movement which is contained in beneficial activity!⁵⁸

We must push still farther the advantages of the æsthetic ideal. Æsthetic certainty is very much superior to the certainty of Science. Appearance is truer than truth; it produces the harmonious cohesion of thought, which alone will realize to the same degree the absolute, complete truth, to which Science has never made any pretence. Probability is provisional, since every new element destroys the equilibrium of it; provisional also is Science. But the advantage that probability has is this, it suffices that it is possible, while Science can not content itself with the relativity to which it is equally condemned. Beauty rests upon probability, which is the æsthetic logic of the mind. But only the feeling for the beautiful carries within itself its own certainty. Existence, the entirely subjective existence of the beautiful, becomes real as soon as it is felt and conceived. On the contrary, the absolute reality of the world eternally escapes from Science. That scientific certainty and æsthetic certainty should be of a different order, that I allow; but what difference does it make, even if one of them were of a superior order, just as soon as only the one of them is possible? Would it not be madness to disdain an acquired certainty, in order obstinately to reach out for an impossible certainty?

Finally, does it not seem that these monuments, these frescoes, whose beauty remains immortally young after five, twenty, fifty centuries, confound the vanity of Science, which, age after age, from century to century, from epoch to epoch denies and condemns itself?

But it is not here that it befits to sound this great discussion concerning the future of Science and the future of the Ideal. The aim of this work is merely to sketch the grand outlines of the æsthetic ideal, and in these final pages I have only wished to awake the mind to the superiority which this ideal draws from the practical impotence of

Science, from its moral sterility, from its final uncertainty.

At bottom it is far less Science than industrialism whose domination threatens the happiness of humanity in the future. Science and the æsthetic may and ought to support one another. Science serves Art and in its turn Art renders precious services to Science. One and the other concur to elevate the human mind high above material life and ever more and more above itself. Thus, both of them facilitate the moral ascent of man; both are the props of the Ideal. But we must define their rôles; the goal of humanity can not be anything else save the æsthetic ideal; Science shall be the servant of Beauty, the collaborator of the Ideal.

And in fact it belongs to Science to render the conditions of material life so easy that the æsthetic life shall become possible. Beauty will only reign when based upon Science, but the glory of Science shall be, to permit the reign of Beauty.⁵⁹

So that the twofold task of directing and limiting industrial activity falls to scientists. They ought to prevent the mistake of confounding industrialism with Science and presenting industrialism to humanity as a goal. If it consisted merely in industrial prodigies, progress would be the most deceiving of illusions. Industrialism, the madness of production, the folly of lucre are forces antagonistic to intelligence, morality and happiness.

Thus, even when Beauty has need of Science, it remains as an Ideal infinitely the superior. I have shown that æsthetic morality is also superior to all the other conceptions of the Ideal, because it alone unites the greatest educational value to the loftiest moral dignity; it is the purest of optimistic doctrines and the most optimistic of the pure moralities.

It is a veritable moral *régime* which the æsthetic system proposes to humanity. The liberty of moral activity and the æsthetic education develop all the virtues that give their beauty to the individual life and to social existence. They re-fashion as it were the human soul, oppressed and as it were deformed by religions and the moral systems that proceed from the religious mind. The æsthetic life brings man and woman together, too much separated in modern society. In the smiling beauty of the hearth it reconstructs the scattered family. Connecting again the links of family traditions in the embellished home, it incites to a growth of the population, a new source of prosperity; while simplifying the needs of life, it augments therein a real domestic ease. The æsthetic existence suppresses the debauchery of the cabaret and of prostitution, which cease to be remedies for the weariness of long leisures. It purifies wealth by taking from it its royal powers, by abolishing the industrial massacres which far too long have been the price that was paid. In good sooth the æsthetic ideal creates human society anew—interests head and heart.

⁵⁸—This can not be denied—there is in æsthetic delight an educational virtue for which science does not offer any equivalent.

⁵⁹—Many are the forms in which science appears as the indispensable aid of the æsthetic ideal: if machinery can simplify labor and procure the laborers those leisure hours necessary to the complete life, medicine and hygiene, for instance, will teach how to make bodies healthier and more beautiful.

Quinet said: "Art is the presentiment of superior forms which slumber still in the bosom of actual things." It is the messenger of the new epoch, it animates it with its breath, it fashions it in the form of its dreams. Guyau has recognized the ritual rôle which art will have to play whenever religious faith shall have definitely deserted the human conscience. Tolstoi expects from art "a realization of the fraternal union among men."

But it is not enough, as these do, to give to art in a way an external rôle in life; it is necessary that the very life and thought themselves should be kneaded through with feeling, will and æsthetic aspirations. All the hours of life ought to be beautiful, all the vibrations of thought, all the attitudes taken by our being ought to be æsthetic. It is necessary that the habit of beauty become our nature, that all of our existence, in fine, should be like a continual hymn to Universal Beauty.

O Beauty! Are you not, in fact, the principle of all that lives? Are you not the profound sense and reason of things? What would the world be without you? You are the living form of every desire and the infinite desire of everything that exists. Through you it is that the universe is animated and toward you it is that its eternal will extends!

You are that All which human intelligence strives in vain to conceive. The supreme Ideal, even God himself, is merely the reflection of your splendor in the conscience of man.

Beauty—that is perfect joy. The hierarchy of beings runs through a definite process. The first manifestation of individual will is the will to live; life being assumed, every creature seeks pleasure; then the intelligences, freeing themselves from the material, demand from beauty the complete and durable pleasures, and in a refined society the best cultivated men no longer definitively enjoy anything more than æsthetic pleasures.

The supreme of pleasure—beauty is the supreme desire. It is the endeavor toward and the symbol of happiness, moreover the most energetic movement in human activity. Thus the cultivation of the love of the beautiful becomes the veritable educational method. In fact the educator has only to demonstrate that moral action is the loftiest of æsthetic pleasures, and it is scarcely more than uniting the terms of an almost evident definition.

From another point of view, æsthetic certainty is the surest if not the most necessary thing; that we have proved.

Beauty links itself to liberty by psychological bonds and social bonds: psychological bonds first of all, since feeling and æsthetic pleasure, being entirely subjective, are also by that very fact entirely individual, and because all creation is essentially personal and free. If Science includes the obligation to believe, like religious dogma itself—on the contrary the æsthetic principle excludes and condemns constraint; and social bonds finally, since the æsthetic cult, ousting the human ideal, abolishes the universal war for the conquest of money, and because also if every war supposes a political dictatorship, the security of peace, by abolishing useless tyranny, guarantees individual liberty—the simple form of happiness.

The æsthetic life is essentially social, since it develops all the virtues in which society finds the

perfection of order and since it groups all the good-wills together for the general good.

Beauty: it is concord, because it is harmony. Above all it is love. Into every love there enter a physical attraction, a sympathy of feelings, tastes and ideas, and a great deal of poetry—that is to say, creation. In all these elements beauty has its share. It commands sympathy. But sympathy in its turn makes the æsthetic work: husband and wife are beautiful one for the other, the child for its mother, the mother is always beautiful to her child. While discovering beauty in beings, love in its turn creates it, just as it is born of love. Michelet has said that all the arts are so many ways of loving, and in return every love is artistic, poetic, creative.

In the mystery of the beginning of things love and beauty have a cradle in common. Is not beauty the flower of life, just as love contains the fruit and seed? Are not their destinies alike, and singularly bound up one in the other? Beauty, awakener of love, love the seed-scatterer of life, that is to say, also seed-scatterer of beauty? Is not the end of beauty generation itself—that act or that faculty which is as it were the culminating point of existences, beyond which the being begins to decline and sometimes ceases all of a sudden to be?

If beauty is identical with love, does it not also merge itself with life? Undoubtedly it creates life. But it is the very same substance thereof. Beauty is the unfolding of life in the species and individual, the blossoming of the physical powers, feelings, ideas, wills—all the moral forces which are the final effort in the evolution of nature, the ultimate aspiration of which is the æsthetic sovereignty.

Beauty is morality, that we have demonstrated completely enough, moreover it is happiness; and that, not only because it forms the charm of life, but precisely because it is the morality therein. In it is realized the identity of the good and of happiness, so long contested.⁶⁰

People have pointed out honest men who are wretched, existences voluntarily sacrificed without recompense. Without recompense? . . . And are you sure? Oftener than we think, sacrifice is a joy. In order that it appear to be the loftiest satisfaction of the heart, it is merely necessary that the beauty therein and the incomparable æsthetic value of it should burst into light. The æsthetic will does not ward off the blows of fate from human life, but, better than any other doctrine, it diminishes the violence of them and is capable of reconstructing some hope out of the ruins of a shattered happiness.

Note 60.—One might follow very far the series of these identities, for beauty lurks at the bottom of everything. Thus the conception of justice has a profoundly æsthetic character, since justice is a harmony; moreover justice has as its principle that feeling of equilibrium which is one of the conditions of beauty. To whatever formula we bring it back in fact—maintenance of written rights, remuneration for good conduct and work, balance of resources and needs—justice is summed up always in an exact equilibrium of the mutual debits and credits of individuals one toward the other or toward human society.

The equilibrium of outlays and acquisitions and the equilibrium, more hidden, of faculties—are not they likewise the conditions of the development of life and its æsthetic harmony?

All in all—de Maistre proved that, after Helvetius—the happy people are the virtuous people. The individual effaces himself before numbers, and if religious morality has sufficed to make peoples happy, how much more surely still will they be happy under the reign of æsthetic morality, freed from the divine restraints and terrors!

Kindliness in minds will make this grand fact intelligible; all happinesses are one. It is to my interest to be good, because it is to my interest that my neighbor should be good. Good engenders the good, just as evil strikes back at evil. The happiness of a being exerts an æsthetic radiation upon the beings that surround it; and the happiness of all the beings whom he loves lights up the soul and life of each of us.

If beauty were not happiness it would be of greater value than happiness, because beauty is that in man which is the highest of all. Thus beauty is the true end of the individual and moreover the social end likewise.

So then, beauty is the source, the framework and very goal of human life. It is the universal principle thereof. There where science has not been able to discover the reason for and the mechanism of things, the æsthetic sense translates its grandeur and expresses the joy of it. Why, if beauty is the fundamental law of the human mind and life, why is it not the vivifying principle and the profound sense of the universe? In nature the mind seems to subjugate matter little by little, and substitute its all-powerful conscience for the brutality of mechanical forces. Is it not allowable to conceive of the future universe as a grand æsthetic thought, a dream of unimaginable beauty, only evolving in order to increase its splendor, and realizing itself ever, without completing itself, in a burst of infinite desire?⁶¹

In this rapid essay I have sketched a conception of the æsthetic ideal while conforming to the first of the three methods proposed. I have allowed to remain in the shade the individualistic theory,

upon which this conception is based; I have entered into no discussion, scarcely have I invoked a few proofs. Exposition without discussion is, besides, neither very useless nor very imprudent. Arguments which persuade best are not those which the author has given; and if he inspires any wish to find some out, no demonstration would equal in value such a result. I would not say that my efforts were lost, if this volume shall engage only a single reader to make himself my collaborator for a moment, and search out unpublished proofs in favor of an æsthetic philosophy.

A capital, a leading motif exists in order to affirm morality without embarrassing oneself with reasons and contradictions, and this motif justifies our summary descriptions of the æsthetic ideal. Analysis may be able to destroy the solidest systems; then, what faith will be left for the human soul? There is no faith that is entirely certain, save that which transcends demonstration and frees itself from those toils.

If Kant has, according to his own expression, *abolished science* in order to build thereupon his faith on metaphysical postulates, first of all he affirmed the certainty of pure morality before any proof whatever. Did the Stoics prove the moral obligation otherwise than by the nobility of the idea of good and by the sovereignty of will? In order that the æsthetic will shall have the certainty of a living reality, it suffices that it should formulate an ideal; but it is necessary that it should affirm the same with a kind of desperate audacity, in order to survive the shipwreck of proofs and systems. Even though Science were a lie, though the good were an illusion, yet would the æsthetic will, still certain, remain the very last of terrestrial verities, because it humanizes that which in man is the most human of all—morality, the love of mankind, beauty—since, thanks to it, this fragile being steals away its destiny from the imbecility of natural forces and stamps a little of its thought upon the eternally moving face of the universe.

Note 61.—If nothing in the universe appears except to disappear, will not beauty some day disappear, and forever? No, beauty will not disappear, so long as thinking and feeling beings exist, for, even if it were not an inseparable quality in things, it would remain no less the essential form of thought and feeling. The æsthetic ideal, in our fragile humanity, is subject, doubtless, to transformations which are inconceivable to us; but the principle

on which it rests can not cease from inscribing itself upon our human nature so long as the living materials of which we are formed are endowed with feeling and thought. Religion is not an eternal need, but the æsthetic vision is just as natural to man as the need of breathing and eating. Whatever stages civilization and the human conscience may traverse, the æsthetic ideal may well invest itself in many forms; it must endure as long as humanity lasts.

THE END

